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## Book Review - The Bohemian South: Creating Countercultures from Poe to Punk

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Off the SHELF

**The Bohemian South: Creating Countercultures from Poe to Punk** edited by Shawn Chandler Bingham and Lindsey E. Freeman (University of North Carolina Press, 2017: ISBN 9781469631677, \$29.95)

In this diverse collection of essays, the quest to find, uncover, and lay bare the South's entanglement with a "bohemian" ethic often feels like a bit of a rebuke 100 years in the making. In the first chapter, Bingham quotes H. L. Mencken's famous retort about the South being "almost as sterile, artistically, intellectually, culturally, as the Sahara Desert," first published in the article "The Sahara of the Bozart" in 1917. Appropriately, 100 years later, scholars, journalists, and others invested in the South's reputation published an almost comprehensive review of all the reasons, both historical and contemporary, why Mencken was mistaken in his indictment. Included in this volume are historical overviews of the South's involvement with the original bohemians of the 19th and 20th century Southern enclaves of bohemian life in art, literature, music, and food, and how the South is continuing her bohemian heritage moving forward in the 21st century.

*The Bohemian South: Creating Counterculture from Poe to Punk* offers a little bit for everyone in terms of how the South was not and is not the Sahara of the South, including scholarly historical research, journalistic essays, and

personal recollections of the South and her people.

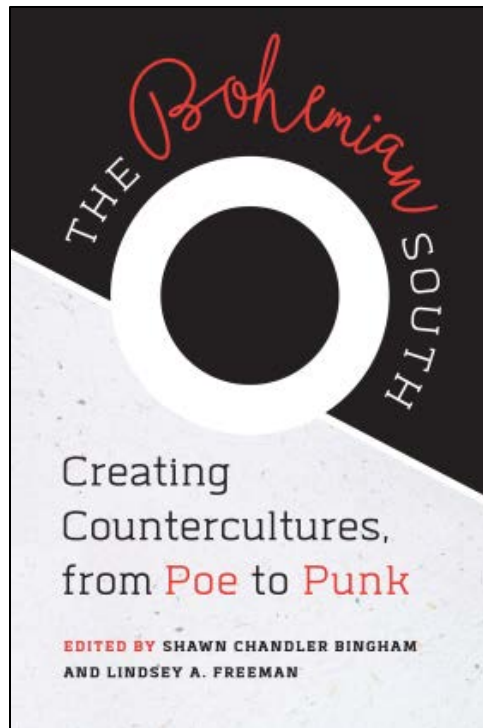
Three chapters, in particular, are the most interesting and offer a glimpse into what the book captures.

In his chapter "The Southern Origins of Bohemian New York: Edward Howland, Ada Clare, and Edgar Allen Poe," Edward Whitley

explores the early American branch of the bohemian subculture of the late 19th century. In particular, he explores Edward Howland and his publication *Saturday Press*, the organ of American Bohemia; Ada Clare, the socialite called "Queen of Bohemia" who hosted salons in her Manhattan brownstone; and Poe, who many call the original American bohemian. What is most interesting about Whitley's investigation into these characters rests in the truth that both Howland and Clare garnered their wealth from their families' Southern plantations. Howland started the *Saturday Press* with the

money gained off the backs of slaves; Clare spent money made from slave labor. In essence, the bedrock of early American bohemianism in the 19th century was financed through slavery.

Chris Offutt, the noted food writer, explores notions of food and class in his chapter "Trash Food." He explores his own identity through food and how others understand it. He talks about "white trash parties" where middle-class people invite guests to bring Cheetos, pork



rinds, fried baloney, and Twinkies; all foods Offutt ate as a child in the hills of Kentucky. He examines how attitudes toward the food we eat harm rural communities and how “trash food” is what people in lower socioeconomic areas can survive on until they become trendy. For example, he explains that crawfish and catfish were “trash foods” until upper-middle class whites decided they were not anymore. Overall, the essay is both personal and universal, a look at one man’s place in the food ecosystem we all take part in and how Southern foodies are reinventing how food is talked about.

Grace Elizabeth Hale covers how an indie music scene burst into existence in Athens, Georgia in her essay, “Acting Out: The Athens, Georgia, Music Scene and the Emergence a Bohemian Diaspora.” While Hale discusses the emergence of bands such as B-52s, Pylon, and REM, she

also looks at how “the Establishment” in traditional scenes in New York and San Francisco reacted with awe at how such acts could emerge from somewhere like Athens, Georgia. In this reaction, she uncovers a thread common to many of the essays in this collection; namely, that those outside the South often gawk at what is created here, precisely because they still see it as the Sahara introduced by Mencken

Highly recommended for academic libraries that collect in the areas of Southern and American studies, as the book covers a wide range of topics relevant to history, sociology, anthropology, literature, music, and more.

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